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THE RURAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT LEAGUE

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The system under which the old time schools of New England were managed was both a recognition of the value of local interest in the local school and an attempt to give that interest efficiency of action by the imposition of local responsibilities and the granting of local powers. All matters relating to the establishment and conduct of the schools were under the direct control of the people of that neighborhood in which the school was located. Generally, the local preference for the employment of a particular teacher was a most important factor. These conditions, naturally, brought about a strong local interest in schools, the intensity of which could be measured easily by the extent to which the functions and powers of the citizens were exercised.

Contact with the world outside of the community was limited. The modern means of transportation and communication had not brought the rural and urban communities into close touch. The chief items of interest were those having to do with local affairs and local institutions. Interest in the school, its conduct and condition was a natural sequence. The school reflected the spirit of the community and it was improved or allowed to remain unimproved as its patrons desired.

The teacher of the school of fifty years ago was a prominent factor in the local social life. She was expected to visit the families having children in school and she took an active part in all community interests. Although parents did little "visiting schools," that lack of contact was more than made up when the conditions were such that the teacher "boarded round." Under this long abandoned plan the teacher took much of the school to the home and took from the home much that would aid in binding the two into close relationship. The older boys and girls had their responsibilities to the school additional to the preparation and recitation of lessons. The floors were swept, the fires built, the grounds kept clean, all by the pupils themselves.

The school of today differs widely from the old time school in the scope and character of the work which it had to do. Conditions have changed, customs are different, the horizon has been broadened and with these changes the relation of the rural school to the community which it serves has not remained the same. Public sentiment demanded a change in the methods of conducting schools and required that the town and the state take over responsibilities formerly held by the district or neighborhood. Wisely were these changes brought about but with them were lost the things that made so easily possible a live local interest in the schools.

THE NEED FOR COÖPERATION

But there are vital and pressing needs of the schools of today which cannot be met without the systematic, coöperative action of parents, teachers and pupils. Civic duty requires that every man and woman whose children are in schools, or who desires the advance of society, shall make active efforts to improve the schools. The public school is one of the most important of civic institutions and it is one of the most important of civic duties to see that it is made most efficient for the civic ends for which it is established. The teacher in the school is encouraged to do her best work when she is conscious of a vigorous interest on the part of the community which she serves. The consciousness of such an interest is not easily attained unless she can come in close personal contact with the parents and citizens of the community.

To secure a personal contact with the parents a plan of home visitation must be adopted by the teacher or some influence must be brought to bear which will result in general parental visitation of the schools. Unless there is some organization which creates a natural bond between the home and the school the visit to the home by the teacher may be interpreted wholly as the payment of a social obligation and the visit to the school by the parent entirely as a small matter of duty to be undertaken occasionally and when convenient. There is needed then some well organized agency created for the purpose of arousing and maintaining a local interest in the local school, to unify it into an effective force for good. Such an agency must have such intimate relation to and connection with the local school that the school's needs and work shall be the source and center of all the agency's action. It should have such

inter-relations with kindred agencies connected with other schools of the town, that their combined action may affect the common needs of all. Also, it should have some close connection with one great central agency whose sphere of action should be state-wide and whose purpose should be to crystallize all the forces of local interest into one great central force acting upon all local agencies and reacted upon by all of them.

THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT LEAGUE OF MAINE

In an attempt to create such an agency the School Improvement League was formed in Maine in the year 1898. The membership of the School Improvement League includes teachers, pupils, parents, school officers and citizens. The local league, with a membership made up of those having interests in a particular school, is affiliated with the local leagues of the town through the organization of a town league, the membership of which is composed of the officers of local leagues. From the state headquarters is furnished material helpful in forming leagues, including handbooks, forms for constitutions, certificates of membership, membership badges or buttons, charters, etc. The certificates of membership are signed by the state superintendent of public schools, the superintendent of schools of the town in which the league is located and the teacher in charge of the school. The membership badges are simple, inexpensive and dignified in form. These features are particularly attractive to most school children whose enthusiasm cannot be lost on the parents.

A TYPICAL CONSTITUTION

Constitution of the.....School Improvement League.

ARTICLE 1.

This League shall be a branch of the School Improvement League of Maine. It shall be know as the.....League.

ARTICLE 2. OBJECT

The object of this organization shall be to unite the pupils, teachers and friends of the school in an effort to help to improve it and to make it of the largest possible service to all the people of the community.

ARTICLE 3. MEMBERS

Membership in this League shall be open to pupils, teachers and friends of the school who are willing to subscribe to the objects named in Article two.

ARTICLE 4. OFFICERS

SEC. 1. The officers of this League shall consist of a President, a Vice-President, a Secretary, a Treasurer and an Executive Committee of three, the

chairman of which shall be the President. These officers shall be elected by ballot at the first meeting of each term.

SEC. 2. The duties of these officers shall be those usually required of such officers. It shall also be the duty of the Secretary to return to the Secretary of the County League full reports of the doings of this League. If there is no County League such report shall be returned to the Secretary of the State League.

ARTICLE 5. FINANCE

SEC. 1. The income of the League shall be derived from such entertainments as may be given by the League and from the voluntary contribution of members and friends of the school. There shall be no required assessments.

SEC. 2. An account of the receipts and expenditures shall be rendered by the Treasurer at the close of each term.

ARTICLE 6. MEETINGS

SEC. 1. The regular meetings of this League shall be held.

SEC. 2. Special meetings may be called by the President.

ARTICLE 7. AMENDMENTS

Alterations or amendments to this constitution may be made by a two-thirds vote of the members present at a regular meeting, providing that notice of such alteration or amendment has been given at a previous regular meeting.

In the main the efforts of the School Improvement League are directed to make the local school the center of local community interest, to improve physical conditions and to help to provide school libraries, pictures and supplementary equipment. With the accomplishment of the first aim, the improvement of physical conditions and the addition of equipment can usually be secured. The extent of local interest may be measured somewhat by the physical improvements made. Upon the teacher herself rests the greatest responsibility for the success or failure of a league. The success of a league means much to her, its failure indicates her failure, her efforts are for the league.

DEFINITE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

A review of changes made in school conditions indicates that much has been accomplished through the activity of the School Improvement League. School grounds have been made objects of pride. Old school buildings have been renovated and brought into keeping with their improved surroundings or have yielded place to new ones of more modern and pleasing architecture. Schoolrooms have been beautified and made attractive through the purchase of pictures and casts or through the organized plan of systematic cleaning and decoration. Libraries have been purchased, a few volumes at a time. Apparatus has been secured which has added much to the comfort and convenience of the school. Changes in methods of heating and ventilation have been brought

about. The organization of the noon hour lunch and of organized play under the direction of the teacher—these and many other things owe their institution in numberless schools to the efforts of the School Improvement League.

Public meetings of the leagues in the form of entertainments and exhibitions given to raise funds for carrying forward the various lines of work set for them to do have made a strong appeal to the interest and encouragement of parents and friends of the children of the league. In matters in which the action of the school authorities have been involved parental and local influences have been crystallized in the interest of the school. Broader, more intelligent and more liberal policies of education and of educational needs and a wider view and greater respect for the rights of others have resulted from the closer acquaintances with the local school and its needs.

The leagues have had a potent influence on teachers. To successfully direct the league's operations has required thought, study and reading along lines new to many and consequently a large intellectual and professional growth has been encouraged. The many new ways in which teachers have been brought into close relations with the parents of their pupils have served to give them increased importance in public estimation and have served to bring them and their work under more intelligent and kindly consideration. They have been enabled to realize the accession of parental confidence and have increased their powers by securing a stronger hold upon the respect, confidence and good will of those served by the school. From all of these things has resulted an increased power of control within and without the school.

But the ultimate purpose of all agencies acting upon schools is the largest good to the children in them. For this reason they are given prominence in the membership and work of the league. For this reason also much of the work of the league is made to hold close relation to the regular work of the school and many of the means employed in helping the league to secure needed funds are distinctly educational in character. The improvements secured through the work of the league are improvements of the type that directly affect the school environment and exert a direct educational force upon the children. In the preparation for regular and special league exercises the children secure a knowledge of history,

biography and literature which the school through its routine program would find it difficult to give. In the business meetings of the league the children acquire a knowledge of and practice in methods of procedure common in deliberative bodies that may prove useful to them in after life. As they take part in the discussions which necessarily arise in determining the work to be done by the league they acquire the power to think and express thought in a consecutive and orderly way and they gain the power of self-command. By attending public meetings in which they take so active a part they learn to respect the requirement that such meetings demand courteous and orderly behavior and respect for the opinions of others. If the league had no other duties to perform than this direct and positive educational function, they would do for the children a very important and much needed work.

To the communities which they serve the leagues have been an ever increasing power for good. More than any other agency the School Improvement League of Maine has successfully made the school a real community center in many localities. Through the improvement of the school building and its surroundings has resulted the improvement of the farm building and its surroundings. To the wholesome influence of the league may be traced an improved bit of road, a better tilled field, a more active interest in canning farm products, and many other things. The inspiration and help of the league cannot be contained within the four walls of the schoolroom.

The entire plan is simple and practical. Its results are direct and desirable. It does not demand an involved piece of machinery for its operation. Started in a small way it is capable of expansion to an agency strong in its power for school improvement.